

Family Camp: Strengthening At-Risk Families Through Adventure Based Initiatives

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Program of Distinction Category

Healthy Lifestyles Categories

- Healthy Relationships, Good Decisions

Sources of funding that support this program:

Family Camp has been funded by NJ's CYFAR initiative from 1999-2002, from the Phillipsburg Housing Authority from 2000- present, from grants from the NJ 4-H Development Fund and Fleet Bank in 2002, and from the participating families from 2003- present.

Knowledge and Research Base

Research, especially in the area of juvenile justice, has shown that prevention techniques are more salient and long lasting (Liddle & Hogue, 2000; United States Department of Justice, 1998). Youth who participated in prevention programs have shown a less likelihood of participating in gangs, or engaging in violence (i.e. Eddy, Reid, Fetrow, 2000; Greenfield, & Senecal, 1995; USDJ, 1998). Similarly, families who participated in programs such as the Iowa Strengthening Families Program for Parents and Youth 10-14 (Molgaard & Spoth, 1998) and/or the Linking the Interests of Families and Teachers (LIFT) (Eddy, Reid, Fetrow, 2000), which were programs specifically targeting prevention techniques, were more likely to achieve such positive outcomes as improving parent and child communication, delaying involvement in violent or criminal behaviors, and reducing the likelihood of abusing drugs and alcohol.

Therapeutic adventure with families is an exciting and powerful integration of adventure therapy and family therapy (Burg, 2001). Karl Rohnke (Rohnke, 1995) identified four basic elements of a successful adventure experience: trust, communication, cooperation, and fun. These elements were combined in a group family format (Gerstein, 1992; Gillis & Bonney, 1986). The result was an enrichment (Gillis, Bendoroff, Rudolph, Clapp, & Nadler, 1991) adventure experience focused on improving healthy communication and clarifying family values, while providing an opportunity to rehearse skills learned, which Garbarino (2001) identified as essential in adoption of new skills learned. Because communication building is significant in strengthening families, three of the six goals of Family Camp focus on improving communication. The evaluations for Family Camp are designed around the *Eight Good Family Communication Practices* that researchers found to strengthen families (Thames & Thomason).

Needs Assessment

State Strengthening CYFAR coalition members discussed the continued need for the development of positive parenting styles and experiences for families. They cited poor parental role models and inappropriate communication styles as a family to be a detriment to familial accord. However, the biggest complaint about effective programs professionals had was attendance and keeping families interested in the learning process. It was extremely difficult for residents in the at-risk communities to follow through with attendance for even 2-3 week programs. Thus, the plan for a weekend getaway evolved where attendance was certain, families could learn new skills, and build a positive shared experience at the same time.

Goals and Objectives

Communication building is a significant factor in strengthening families. Three of the six goals of Family Camp focus on improving communication. The evaluations for Family Camp are designed around the *Eight Good Family Communication Practices* that researchers found to strengthen families. The following objectives that comprise positive communication were put in place.

1. Increase communication among family members
2. Provide opportunities for family socialization and fun
3. Identify barriers to positive communication
4. Identify values the family feels are important
5. Identify barriers to family values
6. Provide opportunities in which the family may implement values

Target Audience

Recruitment for participants for this program is in the at-risk communities of New Jersey, including Paterson, Vineland, Morristown, Dover and Phillipsburg. Family is defined as all members of a household. Eligible families had at least one child in the grades of 3rd – 9th grade. In Phillipsburg, family residents of the Phillipsburg Housing Authority were recruited. This smaller community (population 1,081) is located within the town limits of the town of Phillipsburg;

however, contact with the larger community is limited due to lack of transportation and its physical location separate from the "downtown" area. 100% of the residents of the Phillipsburg Housing Authority spend 30 percent or more of their income on housing costs and are considered low-income working families. 39% of residents are single parent families. Many of the teens who reside in the housing authority attend the Phillipsburg Alternative School where the graduation rate for 2004 was 68.8%. The Phillipsburg Housing Authority will pay \$25 per person in the family to attend.

Program Design and Content

Methods used to deliver the program

During the weekend, the family as a whole participated in various experiential, hands on education activities that challenged individuals to learn about each other, respect each other, and spend quality time learning together in the backdrop of a camp setting. The vision was to build on family strengths by reinforcing the importance of the family unit and increasing positive communication among family members. Using adventure based activities in a specific metaphorical framework, facilitators addressed difficult issues light heartedly during teachable moments when the family was not in crisis. The program allows for cognitive restructuring and allowing opportunities to practice new skills through less structured recreational camping activities. To further emphasize the strengths of the family, a Family Memory Book (Torretta, 2003) activity was designed and used during the camp weekend that is a catalyst for families to share thoughts and feelings with one another in an heirloom-quality format.

Curricula and/or educational materials

Developed specifically for this program is the *Family Camp: A curriculum for strengthening families using adventure-based initiatives*. The curriculum encompasses the entire program from the planning stages to evaluations. In the curriculum are the formats for the two and three day models of the program and an outline of the sequenced adventure activities successfully used in the pilot camps. Also included in the curriculum is the Family Memory Book, which is an integral part of Family Camp, used on the second evening of camp. Family Memory Book pages are available on line for replication at <http://nj4h.rutgers.edu/pubs>

Partnerships or collaborations

This annual program began in 1999 as a joint effort between the 4-H Youth Development and Family and Community Health Sciences Departments of Rutgers Cooperative Research and Extension. Assistance with evaluation comes from the Department of Extension Specialists. The Children Youth and Families at Risk State Strengthening grant initially funded the program. NJ Department of Welfare, the Family Guidance Center of Warren County, the Phillipsburg Library, Headstart of Phillipsburg, Phillipsburg Housing Authority, and other agencies consisted of the community coalitions supported the program through recruiting of families. Based on the successes of the program, the Phillipsburg Housing Authority began funding for their clientele to attend. Currently the coalition of agencies in Phillipsburg supports this program through referrals.

Program Evaluation

Process

A set of indicators was developed to gauge yearly process outcome success. Several indicators were geared exclusively towards parents, as traditionally they are more difficult to motivate to participate in adventure-based activities. Process indicators expected per session include:

1. Four (4) families (w/a minimum of 11 people) will participate in the camp weekend.
2. 80% of parents will participate will engage in the 5-hour structured family adventure activities with their children.
3. 80% of parents and children will participate in the 1-hour Family Memory Book session.
4. 75% of parents will participate with their children in the non-structured recreation activities offered as an opportunity to practice skills learned during camp.
5. 75% of the camp families will return for the Picture Party in the community post camp and will complete the posttest.
6. Participants will rate the adventure-based teaching effectiveness and program content with at least a 4.0 (5=excellent) on the Rutgers Cooperative Research and Extension teaching evaluation form.

A total of 30 families have participated in family camp since its inception in 1999. Four families have participated every year, and two families have returned a second time. Family camp participants were primarily minority, 20% African American, 10% Latino, and 70% Caucasian. Process indicators reveal the Family Camp has achieved success in all areas:

1. An average of seven (7) families attended camp during each of the four years of operation.
2. 90% of parents participated in at least 4 hours of the 5-hour structured activities, and 80% of parents have participated in all 5 hours of the structured activities.
3. 100% of parents and 99% of children participated in the Family Memory Book session.
4. 85% of the parents participated in the non-structured recreation activities.
5. 75% of the camp families participated in the Picture Party and completed the posttest.
6. Participants rated the adventure-based teaching effectiveness at 4.61, and program content was rated 4.50.

Process Indicator	Expected Outcome	Actual Outcome
1. Families attending camp	4	7
2. Parents participate in 5-hour structured adventure activities	80%	90% 4 of 5 hours 80% 5 hours
3. Parents and children participate in Memory Book session	80%	100% parents 99% children
4. Parents participate in non-structured activities	80%	85%
5. Families participate in post-camp Picture Party	75%	75%
6. Teaching effectiveness Program content	4.0 4.0	4.61 teaching 4.5 program

Outcomes and Impacts

Short Term Outcomes. Short term outcomes reflect learning that may have occurred as a result of program participation; particularly changes in knowledge, skills, attitudes, motivation, awareness, and aspirations. The Rutgers Cooperative Research and Extension teaching evaluation form was distributed to all participants the last day of camp. Participants indicated (four year averages):

- 100% of participants (children and parents) of Family Camp were more interested in the family strengthening experience.
- 96% of participants would do something new or different as a result of attending Family Camp.
- 89% of participants would change the way they think, act, or behave, and planned to share what they learned with others.

A father of five approached camp staff unsolicited and stated that his family had attended Family Camp for two years before his children convinced him to come. "The kids treat each other so well the first few months after camp. They are respectful and don't fight. I had to come see what happens here that makes them change. It has really made a difference in my family's life. Thank you for this program."

Several weeks after camp the adult participants credited Family Camp with:

- Increasing family members' trust, respect, patience and positive communications
- Increasing the time families spend together
- Improving family problem solving skills

Children stated that Family Camp:

- Increased trust and positive communication between family members
- Increased the time families spend together

- Improved family problem solving skills

Communication to stakeholders

Since its inception in 1999, 30 families from NJ's at risk communities of Paterson, Dover, Morristown, Phillipsburg and Vineland have participated. Annual impact reports and awards won are sent to collaborators keep agencies informed of its successes.

Program Sustainability

Citing the increase in community involvement of families after participating in the camp, the Phillipsburg Housing Authority has financially supported this program since 2000 for its residents who are up to date on their rent to attend. Residents outside the housing authority who have attended this program in the past have organized and implemented fundraisers to defray the cost of the camp. County 4-H staff implemented the program through their base programming efforts.

Replication

The Family Camp model or major components of it has already been used with 221 at-risk audiences of Philadelphia, PA, Wyandotte County, Kansas, Cheshire County, New Hampshire, Dakota County, Minnesota, Carroll County, New Hampshire, Alameda County, California and the Hardrock Council on Substance Abuse in Navajo County, Arizona. The memory book component is extractible for existing day strengthening family programs. Family Camp has been proven effective in two-day model as well as the traditional three-day model. The new Family Camp curriculum provides guidance in designing a flexible and effective program. Family Memory Book pages with complete instructions are available on line for replication.

Rationale and Importance of Program

Families, who meet any of USDA's poverty risk factors, typically have children who are susceptible to a number of negative outcomes such as child abuse and neglect, substance abuse, crime, teenage pregnancy, violence, poor health, underachievement and various other outcomes. Family camp was specifically designed to as a prevention strategy to strengthen at-risk families.

Imagine the family as a puzzle; each piece represents a member of the family. The puzzle pieces fit nicely to make an overall picture. Now imagine removing a child puzzle piece to attend a program or workshop. Stimulated with new information, this piece now changes shape as new ideas are grasped and internalized. The child piece now returns to the family puzzle, but finds that (s)he no longer "fits" like before. One of two things will happen. Either the rest of the family puzzle will adjust to the new piece's shape to allow for the changes, or, more often than not, the child puzzle will revert back to its original shape to "just get along" like before.



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